

ONLY THE PENITENT SHALL PASS
REHABILITATING REPENTANCE
THE UNITED CHURCH OF GAINESVILLE
LENT: THE ART OF PILGRIMAGE
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Psalm 130 – NRSV, and Stephen Mitchell
*NRSV – Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord,
Lord hear my voice!...
If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord who could stand?*

(Latin – De profundis clamavi ad te Domine)

*Mitchell:
Out of the depths, Lord I call you; let me feel you even in this darkness.
Take away my affliction or give me the strength to endure.
If all our mistakes were indelible, which of us could survive?
But you have forgiven us, even when we cannot forgive ourselves.*

*I listen for you; my soul listens like a deer in the forest.
My soul waits more intently than a soldier watching for the dawn.
Answer me; open my heart so that I can wholly receive you.
And teach me that when I am ready,
You will let this suffering pass.*

James 2:14-17 – *What good is it my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill." And yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*

Sandy gave an excellent sermon on forgiveness in January, with 14 points to remember about forgiving. Today I want to bring us to the other side of forgiveness, and that is thinking about ourselves as the ones who seek forgiveness, who need to repent, to be penitent. Penitence needs to be rehabilitated because so many of our public figures have cheapened it by defining it as a quick visit to rehab after a public screw up followed by their pronouncement of their own absolution.

To repent means to turn, especially to turn away from behaviors that have been hurtful and destructive. There's an old joke. A guy goes to the doctor and says, "Doc, it hurts when I do this (swinging arm around)." The doctor says, "Then, then don't do that."

At the most very basic level, to repent is to quit doing what hurts me and what hurts others.

I heard a story from a man in this church who had let a great distance open up between his daughter and himself after his divorce. He was sorry. He felt terrible, but nothing changed for quite a while. Then one day his daughter now a young adult planned to move cross-country. The man decided he would drop everything and drive his daughter on this trip. That major offer of support which in itself was a change in behavior, the connections he made with her on the journey and his commitment to show her by his actions that he cared for her as a father put this relationship back together.

In the 1989 film, "Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade", which is good to remember, because the new "Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull" is scheduled for release this May, there is a scene where Indie, played by Harrison Ford, is searching for the Holy Grail. To do this he has to pass through a deadly maze. He has a notebook he has received from his dying father with cryptic instructions.

One phrase sticks in his head as he approaches the maze, "Only the penitent shall pass... only the penitent shall pass."

"What does that mean?" he wonders. "Penitence," he thinks, "humility", and he falls to his knees just as a giant, razor-sharp, circular blade swooshes over him. If he had been standing, not kneeling, the blade would have sliced him in half.

Penitence is lowering our level of pride and stubbornness. Sometimes it means keeping our head down. It always means a change of behavior.

There is a story of a man named John who was born in London in 1725. His father was a merchant commander, and age 11, John went to sea with his father (think of how young that is.) When his father retired in 1744, John was what they call "impressed into service" to work on the man-of-war, H.M.S. Harwich, which wasn't much different than being kidnapped. He was 21. He was abused and mistreated, and when he had the chance he deserted. When he was captured, he was publicly whipped and demoted in rank. He was transferred to serve on a slave ship. As a servant of a slave trader, he was again brutally abused. In 1748 he was rescued by a sea captain who was a friend of his father. John eventually became captain of his own slave ship.

By his own description, John was a wild young man with no religious convictions, engaging in all manner of immoral and destructive personal and professional behavior. However, on one voyage, trying to steer his sheep through a violent storm he experienced what he called his great deliverance, for when it seemed certain that the ship would sink and all would be lost, he cried out, "Lord, have mercy." He believed this was the first time he had called upon God for help and the first time he experienced the grace of God directly. He and his ship survived the storm. He remembered that day, May 10, for the rest of his life.

He did not end his business as a slave trader at this time, but he did his best to improve their conditions on his ship, a beginning.

In 1750 he left sailing, and in 1755 he married. He continued his education and he eventually was ordained into the Church of England. He became pastor of a large church in London. A member of this church was William Wilberforce, who became the leader in the movement to abolish slavery in England.

John Newton, his full name, a prodigal young man, a slave trader as adult, repented, changed his ways, experienced grace, became a different man, abandoned any support of the slave trade, worked with William Wilberforce to abolish the trade and wrote the hymn, "Amazing Grace."

Another very different story is of one of the most difficult places I visit, Union Correctional Institution, the state prison where death row is housed.

It is like entering an Indiana Jones type maze. When I arrive and show my identification, a heavy barred gate slides open and then closes behind me. Another barred gate slides open in front of me and closes behind and I meet a guard who sends me through a metal detector. Like the airport I slide off my shoes, take off my belt, watch, and remove my glasses, all my change, pens and notebooks. I leave my driver's license with the guard. The guard shouts, "open five" and another barred gate opens.

I walk outside and then another guard to opens another gate that leads to death row. This is a chain link fence with a chain link top to it covered by coils of razor sharp jagged ribbon wire, and finally, electrified. I come to a fifth gate and enter the building where death row is housed. A guard opens yet another gate. It closes behind me. Then a seventh gate is opened to the hall where I will visit Ray Meeks. Ray is in a holding cell where he has room only to stand or sit. He is brought to me with manacles on his hands and feet connected by chains. We are taken to a visiting room where I am locked in with Ray, as gentle a man as I have ever met, still chained hand and foot. We talk, we share. I try to help him make sense of his life, what meaning and purpose is left for him. I believe that Ray is innocent of charge of first degree murder. Yet since 1974 he has been on death row.

So I think of his prison and realize once upon a time prisons were and some are still called penitentiaries. I often tell Ray that he is in a penitentiary, a place where he in fact is doing penance not only for whatever mistakes he made, none of which merit the isolation he has endured for 34 years, but for the sins and pride of our society.

The U.S. has the highest prison population in the world, both in terms of raw numbers and per capita. UCI as all other prisons in America is filled overwhelmingly with black men. In fact one out of every 13 black men in America is in prison, compared to one out of every 100 white men. They are doing penance not only for the wrongs they have committed, but also for us, for the ways we have failed them in the educational, legal, and the economic systems of our society.

And Ray understands this. He says he feels like a monk who will spend his life in a cell, praying for the rest of the world. Before I leave I always read a passage of scripture and I reach for his hands, which he does his best to extend to me given the chains, and we pray.

I believe he trusts in God's forgiveness and has found meaning in his existence. He is a penitent man, and he shall indeed pass into God's grace. We need to repent for what our society has done to all these children of God in our prisons.

In a life where I think we spend a lot of time dwelling on who has wronged us, whom we should or should not, can or cannot forgive, let us today simply remember the arenas in our own life where we could stand to change our ways, to lower our attitudes and perhaps our heads a little, lest the swirling blade of life's realities slice off our high and mighty pride.

There are four things I've learned about penitence and repentance from this scripture and these stories.

First, penitence is not the same as punishment. There is the element of punishment in the legal world, and for children and teenagers in the world of families. But penitence is something different. We tend to think of it, however, like the self flagellation of the albino monk in The Da Vinci Code who wore that barbed strap digging into the flesh of his thigh. There are all kinds of acts of misguided penitence in Christian tradition among religious figures who seem to believe that suffering for its own sake is desired by God. That is not true penitence.

Second, I think while it is important to apologize for hurtful actions and take our punishment where appropriate, repentance involves another more important and crucial step. It is admitting not only that we are sorry but also that we are wrong.

One of my favorite all-time TV characters is Arthur Fonzarelli, the Fonz, from the show "Happy Days" which is a twenty year old show about a time twenty years before it. Wow is that old.

Fonz was the greaser, with the black leather jacket, fast car and know-it-all attitude. Fonz always had an angle that would beat the system. On rare occasions, however, Fonz's plans didn't work, and the hardest word for him to utter was that he was wr... wrrr... wrong!

I myself have been known to be a sometimes stubborn, self-assured sort. And it's become something of a legacy in my family life that I have the same difficulty saying the word, wr. Wrrr. Wrong!

But that is an important step in repentance, not only being sorry, but admitting that we're wrong.

Third, beyond punishment, and being sorry, and admitting we are wrong, being penitent means changing our ways and changing our life. It means considering how we are going to live differently.

Penitence begins with the humility of lowering our heads like Indiana Jones and admitting we are wrong like the Fonz. But it continues with standing up and walking in a new way as a new person.

The fourth area of penitence is our need for a power beyond ourselves to make these changes in our lives, for we don't do very well in changing our ways alone. We need the power of the holy that transforms. John Newton finally experienced transformation in that storm where he found himself inexplicably uttering, "Lord have mercy". This began a long slow change of his life.

At some point to survive prison, Ray Meeks taught himself to read, and actually read the bible all the way through three times. He found a way to survive and thrive in the penitentiary that is his world.

Psalm 130 that we read this morning reminds me that if God considered all our mistakes indelible, which of us could survive? In the midst of calling on this loving God, repentance for me begins with stopping and looking for the clue to a new chapter in life. It's being as still and aware of a need to move in a new direction as a deer in the woods. It's like waiting as intently as a soldier who has been on watch all night for the dawn, when finally he or she can see that all shall be well. When we find, as the psalmist says, a God who is always more ready to forgive us than even we are ready to forgive ourselves, then I believe we can take that next step of repentance, and rise up to change our lives. And then we will have, as the letter of James tells us, both faith and good works, which is a life worth living.

Prayer: Sandy Reimer

O Dayspring of Light, Mirror of Justice, I pray for the gift of your renewal that I may open my soul to the springcleaning I need to do, that I may be guided by your truth and wisdom.

In those places where I suffer from deception, the inability to see my own wrong, may my heart and mind be illuminated by your light, by your promise of forgiveness, and by your will for what is wrong to be made right.

I ask for the trust and the confidence to change what I need to change in my life and for the commitment to walk this path of restoration for the sake of others as well as for my own soul.

O Teacher of my Soul, may the green life returning to the earth return to my life as well, with the grace of new beginnings and deeper awareness.
Amen.